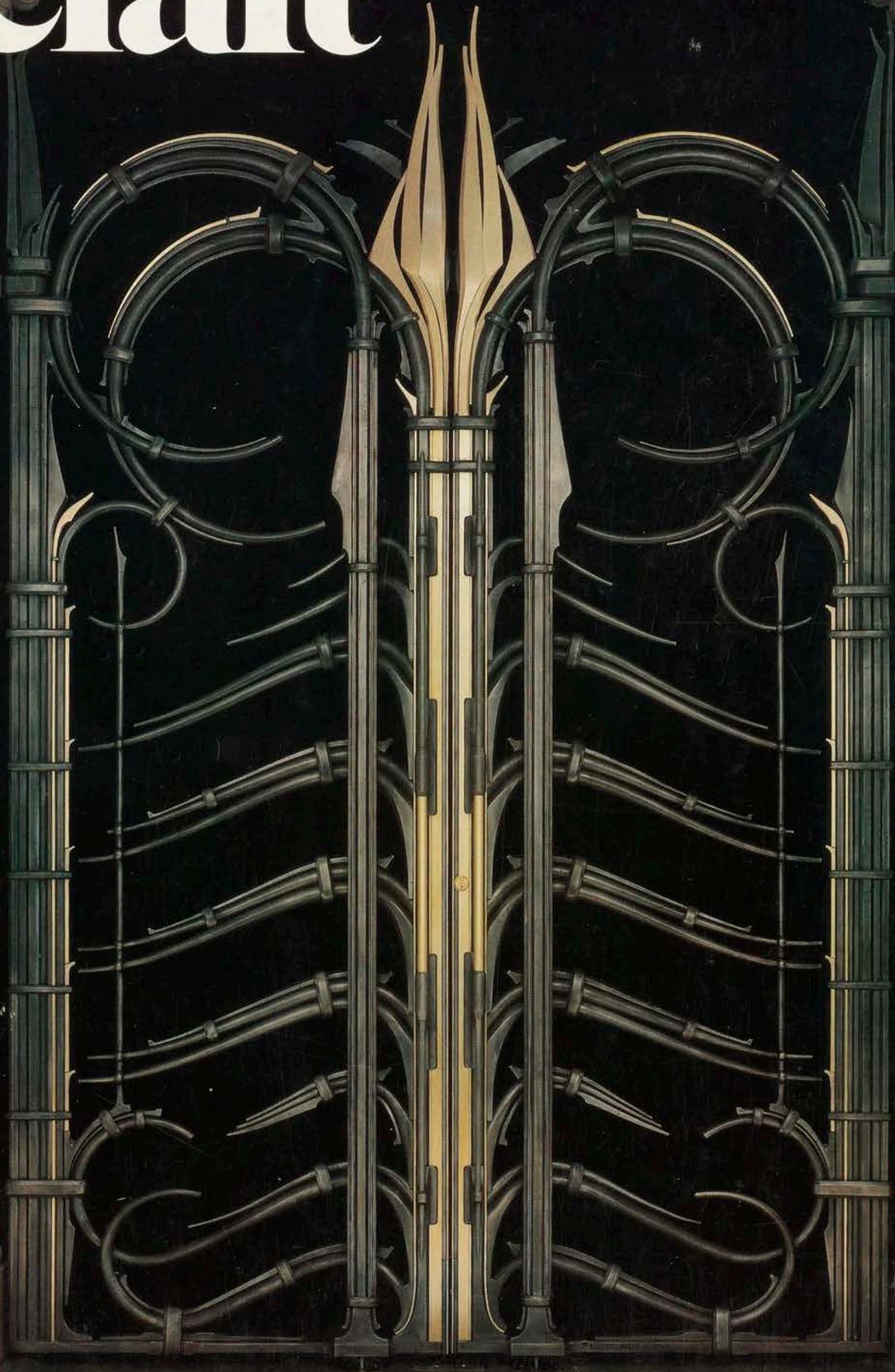


AMERICAN

APRIL/MAY 1981 \$3.75

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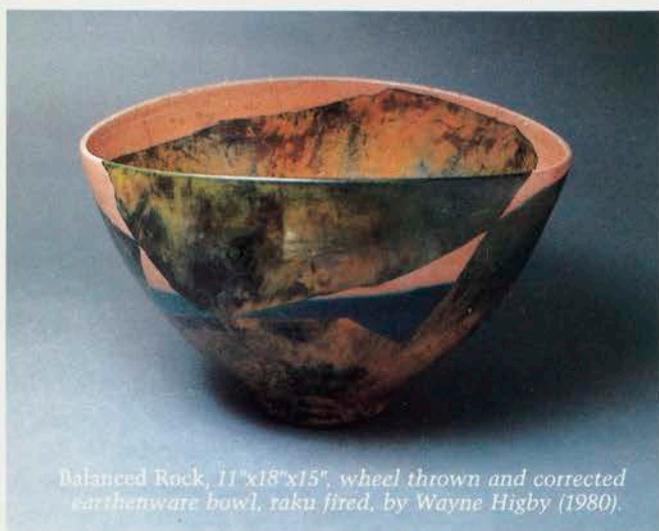
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# AMERICAN craft

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PHOTO: STEPHEN MEYERS

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*From the exhibition "Old Traditions—New Directions," Goodland, plain weave with supplementary wefts, cotton, rayon, linen, 43½"x41½", by Cynthia Schira (1980), courtesy of Greenwood Gallery. Story on page 2. Photograph: Joel Breger.*

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AMERICAN CRAFT (ISSN-0194-8008) is published bimonthly by the American Craft Council, 22 W. 55th St., New York, NY 10019. Telephone: 212-397-0600. Membership rates: \$27.50 per year and higher, includes subscription to AMERICAN CRAFT (formerly CRAFT HORIZONS). Second class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing office. Copyright © 1981 by American Craft Council. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part is prohibited. Address unsolicited material to Editorial Department, AMERICAN CRAFT, 22 W. 55th St., New York, NY 10019. Material will be handled with care, but the magazine assumes no responsibility for it. Manuscripts will be returned only if accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope. The complete contents of each issue of AMERICAN CRAFT are indexed in the Art Index and Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, available in public libraries. Book reviews published in AMERICAN CRAFT are indexed in Book Review Index. Microfilm edition is available from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Microfiche edition is available from Bell and Howell, Periodical Department, Old Mansfield Rd., Wooster, OH 44691. For change of address, give old address as well as new with zip code; allow six weeks for change to become effective. Address all subscription correspondence to: Membership Department, American Craft Council, P.O. Box 561, Martinsville, NJ 08836. National newsstand distribution: Eastern News Distributors, Inc., 111 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10011.



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TEXT BY PAUL HOLLISTER.  
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**D**ouglas Heller's influence on producers and collectors of contemporary glass tells as much about the growth of the studio glass movement as it does about his two galleries in New York City. When the American movement came into being in the early 1960s, Douglas was a teenage collector of pre-Columbian ceramics. It was an inclination inspired by his family and later nourished by college art appreciation courses and visits to museums. It was at antique shows in the early '70s that he got to know the art glass dealers Arthur and Minna Rosenblatt. Once, when he showed them a pre-Columbian piece he had just acquired, Arthur asked, "Why don't you look at something really beautiful like a vase by Gallé or Tiffany?" The remark made an impression on Douglas.

At that time young glassmakers were also making the rounds of the antique shows in attempts to reach the collectors' market, and Rosenblatt suggested that his son Joshua and Douglas might represent them. In 1972, Douglas and Joshua formed Contemporary Art Glass Group to represent Mark Peiser, John Nygren, James Lundberg and Roland Jahn, renting space at antique shows in the tri-state area to show their one-of-a-kind, signed pieces. Between shows Douglas and Joshua exhibited at the old Arts and Antiques Center, the arcade of shops once located on East 53rd Street in New York. "During this phase of the business," Douglas says, "every dollar was reinvested. I was fortunate that my wife Annie was willing to support me."

Those shows enabled Douglas and Joshua to build up a mailing list and establish a small following. By 1974, they were able to rent a tiny shop at 816 Madison Avenue at 68th Street. Douglas observes, "The shop was a window on the world, and with it we took a step into the big time." Within weeks they were able to extend the price range from a top of \$150 to \$250, then to \$500. More recently prices have run as high as \$9,000.

Contemporary Art Glass Group was now a link between glassmaker and collector. With increased sales, Douglas began urging collectors to be more discriminating and encouraged glassmakers to produce better pieces. In this advisory capacity he was obliged to travel all over the country to see a good deal more glass than there was space to exhibit. His criteria for selecting glass included a developed, recognizable style and excellence of technique.

Douglas has analyzed the way serious collectors approach new glass. First they look and perhaps ask a few questions, then make three or four more visits and ask a

few more questions. Then they take the plunge. "The first purchase," Douglas says, "is usually followed by a great rush of enthusiasm. Collecting can be a consuming passion. I know that I derive tremendous pleasure from discovering and handling good glass. The gallery has been my collection, always evolving, growing as the studio glass movement grows."



**ABOVE:** *Tri-fold Black and White, glass with wire, 9" high, by Sydney Cash.* **OPPOSITE PAGE:** *Contemporary Art Glass Gallery's 400-square-foot street level floor with its modified Lord & Burnham greenhouse, which serves as a showcase.*

It was the evolution of the glass movement that forced Douglas and Joshua to seek more display space. In the Bicentennial year, they staged "Contemporary Art Glass '76," a national show in which work by 66 glass artists occupied 4000 square feet in the highly visible Lever House. There was a poster and a small catalog that is now a collector's item. Lisa Hammel of the *New York Times* wrote that the show "was a great visual delight" and urged people to visit. It was a huge success in reaching new audiences. No longer content to maintain just a chic glass shop, Douglas and Joshua moved to larger quarters at 806 Madison Avenue and took the name Contemporary Art Glass Gallery.

The two-story space was planned by award-winning interior designer Robin Drake as a shop/gallery for dis-

playing everything from handmade glass marbles to important glass sculptures. At the street level a modified Lord & Burnham greenhouse with quartz spotlights serves as the dramatic showcase for monthly exhibitions; a bakery case is the sales counter. Downstairs an informal assemblage of crowded cases creates an atmosphere in which collectors love to browse. Douglas says, "We didn't realize it at the time but we were the first high-tech glass gallery."

"Glass America 1978," a second invitational exhibition of 50 glass artists' work at Lever House, was promoted by a slick catalog with a now famous work on the cover—Tom Patti's *Solar Riser*. This piece was eventually



sold to The Museum of Modern Art and, within a year, pieces by other contemporary glassmakers passed to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Toledo Museum of Art and The Corning Museum of Glass. In 1978, Joshua left the gallery to join his family's antique glass business, and Douglas's brother Michael signed on full time, becoming a partner the next year.

In 1979, The Corning Museum's worldwide survey, "New Glass," further exposed Douglas to the broad spectrum of American and European glass and convinced him that new space was needed to separate the gallery from the shop. Gallery 2 opened at 18 East 67th Street, its white walls and hardwood floors an ideal environment for the series of monthly exhibitions staged there. In the back room one could move entirely around the objects shown. But Douglas realized that while Gallery 2 was beautiful, its off-avenue location was too quiet. In the

summer of 1980 the Hellers found new space at 965 Madison at 75th Street, halfway between the Whitney Museum of American Art and Sotheby Parke Bernet. "We negotiated the lease so fast," Douglas remarks, "that for a period of four months we held leases on three prime locations at over \$98,000 in annual rent." Gallery 2 was then closed.

The suavely articulated display space in the new Heller Gallery, as it is called, occupies two floors. "We've had days at both galleries when the crowds were so thick we've had to lock the doors," Douglas says. "But Heller Gallery is also visited regularly by an international clientele of several hundred collectors—Swiss, German, English, South American—who come to view work by the more than 100 glassmakers we represent. We mail 120,000 full-color announcements annually." Rapport with museums is generally good and Douglas has encouraged collectors to donate outstanding pieces to museums and give them money to help build their modern glass collections. Auctioneers and experts from Sotheby's and Christie's are also regular visitors to the gallery, and Douglas feels another important audience is "the appreciators," who come in not to collect but to enjoy and to study.

All of this is a demonstration of how the contemporary glass movement is burgeoning. While American glassmakers in recent years were studying in European design schools and working in glass factories in various centers in Scandinavia, in Vienna and in Italy, their European counterparts came to learn and teach at the Pilchuck School in Washington and Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina. The age-old secrecy of glassmakers is out, sharing is in, and the result is a kind of cultural exchange between the old world and the new. The European factory concept is coming closer to the American practice of a designer who also blows the glass in his own studio; while with larger pieces of glass to manipulate, Americans are beginning to appreciate the European concept of teamwork and shared skills.

"A lot of glassmakers have come out of art schools and are working in what is traditionally regarded as a craft field," Douglas says. "Glassmaking calls for an enormous amount of technical knowledge and craftsmanship. Some glassmakers are technicians, some craftsmen and some artists. The art schools in America, perhaps unintentionally, encourage the student to produce for the market before the work has matured."

Douglas's several galleries have been generally recognized as being the first devoted exclusively to contemporary art glass. Heller Gallery exhibits the work of three glass artists simultaneously each month, twelve months of the year—two in the upstairs rooms and one in the large downstairs gallery. Not all the glass is the pleasing, easy-to-live-with work that most collectors enjoy; some of it is frankly outrageous and some, like the weighty skull sculptures of the internationally-known Yugoslavian artist Raoul Goldoni shown recently, evoke solemn thoughts. Such work is there because Douglas feels it is important to educate, but he shows it along with more



**ABOVE:** Main floor exhibition space at Heller Gallery. **BELOW:** Glass sculptures and drawings by Yugoslavian artist Raoul Goldoni in the downstairs gallery. Total space of both floors is 1600 square feet. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Ancient Persimmon, blown and applied glass, 8" high, by John Nygren.

salable work that, in effect, subsidizes the exhibitions. He is thus able to experiment without undue financial risk. As American and European contemporary glass movements have cross-fertilized each other, the Hellers have enlarged the scope of their shows. Last year a handsome display of glass by Scandinavian artists demonstrated a coherent tradition in a variety of techniques. Future plans include exhibitions of Czechoslovakian and British glass alternating with American studio glass.

At 34, Douglas hopes that his galleries will continue to expand in scope as they have in size. In fact, Heller Gallery recently showed the knotted fiberwork of Diane Itter, and the mixed media work of Hy Klebanow is currently on view (April 9-30). As Douglas Heller sums it up, "My dream is to have a private museum with unlimited exhibition space. The country is in the midst of glass madness and it's partly my fault." □

*Paul Hollister has been writing and lecturing on glass since 1965. He is editor of the bulletin of the National Early American Glass Club and has contributed to Antiques, the Journal of Glass Studies and the New York Times.*

